



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on March 26, 2012

Iran Nuke Threat Not Imminent, Officials Say

Iran does not have a nuclear bomb, has not decided to build one and is probably years away from having a deliverable nuclear warhead. Those are three things the United States, its European allies, and Israel all agree on, according to a March 23 Reuters report. The report, based on interviews with U.S. and European officials with access to intelligence on nuclear-related activities in Iran, is in marked contrast to much of the talk about Iran's nuclear program, both in the United States, where talk of military action against Iran is often threatened or implied, and in Israel, where a potential preventive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities has been a hot topic of debate. Conflicting views on the subject still abound, but the consensus appears to be the threat of a nuclear armed Iran is not imminent.



"They're keeping the soup warm but they are not cooking it," an unnamed U.S. official told Reuters. The report is the latest in a series of defense analyses in recent months that support the findings of a then-controversial National Intelligence Estimate in 2007, based on the investigations of 16 American intelligence agencies, that stated with "high confidence" Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003. Iranian officials have maintained that their nuclear program is for medical applications and energy production. A March 4 article in the [New York Times](#) quoted a European official involved in diplomatic efforts with Iran as saying, "while the intentions of the Iranian regime remain opaque, we don't believe they have made the decision to weaponize." Yet, the official observed, "the war drumbeat is beating louder in Washington."

Israel and the United States have expressed worry that Tehran could divert its nuclear production into a renewed weapons program, something President Obama has said would threaten the stability of a volatile region in which Israel and Pakistan are already nuclear-armed states. Speculation about a possible Israeli strike increased last week when Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned that Iran is on the verge of moving its nuclear facilities underground, making them immune from an aerial attack. While the United States, has spearheaded an international program of economic sanctions against Iran, U.S. officials have been urging restraint on Israel in an effort to avoid a military attack that could set off a widespread war in the Middle East with yet unknown military, political, and economic consequences. Given the close ties between the United States and Israel, Iranian retaliation against Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq is seen as a strong possibility. Barak has called for stronger sanctions and emphasized that Israel would act in its own defense, as dictated by its own security assessments.

"The world, including the current U.S. administration, understands and accepts that Israel necessarily views the threat differently than they do, and that ultimately, Israel is responsible for taking the



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decisions related to its future, its security and its destiny," the defense minister said in testimony to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the Israeli parliament. Tensions between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran have increased in recent years due to ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and hostile statements by Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that have been widely interpreted as a threat to destroy the Jewish state. While Israel is said to have 200 to 300 nuclear warheads, Iran has ballistic missiles capable of reaching Israel with conventional bombs. Aside from a possible nuclear attack, U.S. and Israeli officials fear a nuclear-armed Iran would feel emboldened to wage conventional war against Israel and possibly other nations in the region, while increasing its support of terrorist organizations.

There is precedent for the kind of attack Israel may be planning. In June 1981 Israeli bombers attacked an Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak, about 18 miles from the capitol in Baghdad. In 2007, President Bush turned down a request from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for a U.S. attack on a nuclear reactor in Syria. Israel then carried out its own bombing raid, destroying the facility. In his book *Decision Points*, Bush said he denied the request because U.S. intelligence "had only a low confidence" the reactor was part of a weapons program.

"The Air Force could destroy the facility, no sweat," the former President wrote in the 2010 memoir. "But bombing a sovereign nation [with] no warning or announced justification would create severe blowback."

There is some question as to how vulnerable Iran's nuclear facilities are to aerial attack even now. Retired Army Colonel Andrew Bacevich, a professor of history and international relations at Boston University, acknowledged during an interview the PBS program [Moyers & Company](#) that the Israeli government may decide their nation's security requires such an attack.

"But identifying the targets, choosing the weapons that can destroy those targets with absolute assurance, I think operationally would be a very difficult thing," Bacevich said, adding an attack would likely provoke retaliation by Iran. "And then beyond that even, I think, proponents of attacking Iran acknowledge that the result wouldn't be to destroy an Iranian nuclear program, it would be to deflect it, to postpone it, to cause it some difficulties. That a year later or two years later, the problem would be back again."

David Axelrod, senior White House political advisor, [has credited](#) President Obama with "bringing the entire world together over the last few years with the most withering economic sanctions that have ever been administered against any country." Yet Republican presidential candidates continue to accuse Obama of not being tough enough with regard to Iran and of weakening in support of Israel. While Obama was pledging his support before the American Israel Political Action Committee on March 4, Newt Gingrich claimed in an interview on CNN that "We're being played for fools" by Iran. "Israel is such a small country," the former House Speaker noted, "that two or three nuclear weapons would be a second Holocaust." Mitt Romney on the same day warned: "If Barack Obama gets re-elected, Iran will have a nuclear weapon, and the world will change if that's the case." A campaign ad released on Friday by former Pennsylvania Senator [Rick Santorum](#) warns of nuclear devastation for some small town in America (called "Obamaville") if the President is reelected. Only Texas Congressman Ron Paul among the major presidential contenders has argued that a nuclear-armed Iran would not be a security threat to the United States.

Warnings of the dangers inherent in a preventive attack on Iran have also been aired, occasionally from an unlikely source. Last December Romney's call for "military options, combined with crippling



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sanctions" prompted Fox's usually bellicose [Bill O'Reilly to warn](#) the former Massachusetts governor:

If you bomb Iran, that starts World War III. You know that. They're going to block (the Strait of) Hormuz. Oil will double. The unintended consequences to the United States all across the Muslim world will be horrible. That's what Iran is banking on.

Yet even as he warned of "loose talk of war" in his speech at the AIPAC conference, President Obama repeated his commitment to use military force if necessary to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear bomb. "I do not have a policy of containment," he said, "I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And as I've made clear time and again during the course of my presidency, I will not hesitate to use force when it is necessary to defend the United States and its interests." In an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of [The Atlantic](#) magazine, Obama affirmed what he called a long-standing "working assumption" about the U.S-Israeli relationship, that "we've got Israel's back."

[Gingrich called](#) the President's pledge "a good step in the right direction," but raised what he called "the core question":

The question for the President is, if the Israeli prime minister decides that he cannot afford to take the risk of waiting to see whether or not the intelligence agencies are right, and he decides that for the survival of Israel, he has to do something to take out the weapons systems, will the President in fact support him or will the President try to stop him? I think that's the core question.

Bacevich, in his interview with Moyers, said he does not believe Iran poses a security threat to the United States. "You know, I think honesty requires us to say that were we Israeli Jews, we might evaluate this threat somewhat differently," he conceded. "I'm not an Israeli Jew, I'm an American. And I believe that the basis for deciding when and where the United States rolls the dice to go to war needs to be informed above all by a calculation of what serves the interest of the American people."

Photo: IR-40 nuclear enrichment facility in Arak, Iran



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